

Tell Me Again, Why Did We Start This Trip at 0300?



By Lt. Paul Berthelotte

Atired driver, winds gusting to 20 knots, and a narrow road create a dangerous combination. That's what 31 Marines found out the hard way while riding a bus.

The driver felt the bus pull sharply to the right. As the tires left the asphalt, the driver pulled hard to the left—too hard. This over-correction sent the bus cutting across the opposite lane and soaring over a 20-foot embankment. It rolled several times and eventually landed upright. None of the Marines were ejected, and only one Marine suffered a permanent injury from a crushed vertebra.

The high winds with gusts were cited as the probable cause for this mishap, but the driver had been driving since 0300. The mishap occurred at 0825. Fatigue also may have played a role in his reaction time. With no little sleep, and only two stops along the convoy route, even the most alert and prepared drivers may find their senses dulled.

Here are some suggestions for the next time you plan a trip.

1. Unit leaders should assign a Marine to help the driver of a bus stay alert.

2. Plan for rest breaks and vehicle checks. We conduct them during foot marches and vehicle convoys in the field; why not have the same mindset with buses?

3. Make sure someone in the convoy has a cell phone or radio. The mishap was in a remote area. If a trucker hadn't passed by and called for help, the injuries could have become more severe. The unit had a cell phone, but it was in a baggage vehicle that had gone ahead of the buses.

4. When a convoy of any size transports Marines and corpsmen, distribute corpsmen evenly throughout the vehicles. In this case, there were three buses, and the corpsmen were all in the same one.

5. Most importantly, travel during the day. The trip was nine hours long. Had they left at 0800, they would have arrived around 1700 with plenty of daylight since it was summer. Is having a driver up at 0200 and on the road by 0300 for an admin movement a risk worth taking? His brain and body were telling him that he belonged in the rack; and we wonder why Marines fall asleep at the wheel. If you want to train the day you arrive, back up your travel by one day.

Marines are usually good about planning a simple trip like this. Once the plan or bus is in motion, don't forget the most important step in BAMCIS and ORM: Supervise.

Had there been on-coming traffic or a steeper ravine, the mishap report could have read "31 fatalities," rather than "31 injured." ❧